

Storme DeLarverie, Early Leader in the Gay Rights Movement, Dies at 93



Storme DeLarverie in 1994, between pictures of herself before she was a male impersonator (left) and during the Stonewall rebellion of 1969. She fought “ugly,” her word for bias of any sort. Credit...Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times
By [William Yardley](#) May 29, 2014

Storme DeLarverie, a singer, cross-dresser and bouncer who may or may not have thrown the first punch at the 1969 [uprising at the Stonewall Inn](#) in Greenwich Village, but who was indisputably one of the first and most assertive members of the modern gay rights movement, died on Saturday in Brooklyn. She was 93.

Her death, following a heart attack on Friday, was confirmed by Lisa Cannistraci, one of her legal guardians.

No one questions whether Ms. DeLarverie was there on June 27, 1969, the night the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, setting off protests that helped start the gay rights movement and are now commemorated during New York’s annual Gay Pride Week. But was she the cross-dressing lesbian whose clubbing by the police helped set the chaos in motion? Some witnesses have said yes, others no.

“Nobody knows who threw the first punch, but it’s rumored that she did, and she said she did,” said Ms. Cannistraci, an owner of the Village lesbian bar Henrietta Hudson. “She told me she did.”

Ms. DeLarverie was a member of the Stonewall Veterans Association and a regular at the pride parade, but she rarely dwelled on her actions that night. Her role in the movement lasted long after 1969. For decades she was a self-appointed guardian of lesbians in the Village.

Tall, androgynous and armed — she held a state gun permit — Ms. DeLarverie roamed lower Seventh and Eighth Avenues and points between into her 80s, patrolling the sidewalks and checking in at lesbian bars. She was on the lookout for what she called “ugliness”: any form of intolerance, bullying or abuse of her “baby girls.”

Ms. DeLarverie had grown up in the South, of mixed race, and spent part of the first half of her life singing and performing as a man. Identity, for her, had been especially complicated, and she did not want others persecuted for theirs.

“I can spot ugly in a minute,” she said in [a 2009 interview](#) for Columbia University’s NYC in Focus journalism project. “No people even pull it around me that know me. They’ll just walk away, and that’s a good thing to do because I’ll either pick up the phone or I’ll nail you.”

Storme DeLarverie (her first name sounds like stormy; her last name is pronounced de-LAR-ver-ee) was born in 1920 in New Orleans. She celebrated her birthday on Dec. 24, though she told people that she was not certain that that was the actual day because of the circumstances of her birth. Her mother, who was black, was a servant in the house of her father, who was white. At some point her father married her mother, and the family moved to California.

She said in interviews that she had begun performing as a singer by her late teens, first as a woman and later dressed as a man. For a while she sang in a jazz group and performed in Europe. Captured on tape at nearly 90, she still sounded smooth singing “Since I Fell for You.”

There was a long period in Chicago, where, she told friends, she was a bodyguard for mobsters. From the mid-1950s through the 1960s Ms. DeLarverie was the M.C. of the Jewel Box Revue, billed as “an unusual variety show.” She dressed as a man; the rest of the cast members, all men, dressed as women. One of the show’s stars was [Lynne Carter](#), a female impersonator who later performed at Carnegie Hall.

No immediate family members survive. Ms. Cannistraci said that Ms. DeLarverie had told her that she had lived for 25 years with a dancer named Diana, who died in the 1970s, and that Ms. DeLarverie had always carried her photograph.

Ms. Cannistraci and another longtime friend, Michele Zalopany, became Ms. DeLarverie’s guardians a few years ago, after Ms. DeLarverie had endured years of

problems — legal, housing, mental health — that ended with her admission to a nursing home in Brooklyn. [Ms. Cannistraci and Ms. Zalopany helped move her to another center in Brooklyn](#), where they said she got better care and had more freedom.

Ms. DeLarverie had earlier lived at the Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan for decades. She made her living working security at the Cubby Hole and later for Ms. Cannistraci at Henrietta Hudson. But she regarded the whole neighborhood as within her jurisdiction.

“She literally walked the streets of downtown Manhattan like a gay superhero,” Ms. Cannistraci said. “She was not to be messed with by any stretch of the imagination.”